

# Who is responsible for the trees?

## A citizens' guide to trees in the community

### A Mutual Benefit

Urban trees improve our lives by benefiting our economy, our environment, and our health.

- Trees improve the appearance of neighborhoods and property, resulting in higher home values.
- Trees lower the demand for energy and reduce cooling and heating bills by providing shade and serving as windbreaks for homes.
- Trees control erosion and reduce urban runoff, resulting in lower stormwater management costs.
- Trees clean the air and water by capturing pollutants that lower air and water quality.
- Trees foster healthy communities by creating safe, shaded, open spaces that encourage children to play and adults to congregate, conduct business, exercise, and interact.

### A Shared Responsibility

Trees are the responsibility of the entire community — including you the citizen and your local government — on both public and private property.

Public property includes parks, greenways, and other areas owned and controlled by your local government. Local government ordinances designate who is responsible for overseeing the maintenance and care of community trees. Many communities assign this



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responsibility to the city arborist, urban forester, or to staff within the public works or similar departments. These professionals will work with their staff or through contractors to maintain vegetation on public property.

On private property, owners are responsible for the maintenance and care of trees, shrubs, and other vegetation. The exception is cutting and pruning trees and shrubs located in right-of-ways or other types of easements — areas of your property designated for such things as utilities and sidewalks that are often directly adjacent to the street. Easements give utilities and local governments the right to maintain vegetation, including pruning and removal of trees and shrubs. Property owners may be prohibited from planting certain vegetation within these easements.

**In North Carolina**, the Overhead High-Voltage Line Safety Act requires anyone working or lifting within 10 feet of overhead power lines or poles to contact the appropriate electric utility through the North Carolina One Call Center: 1.800.632.4949

### Why are trees pruned or removed in my community?

As trees grow and develop they require maintenance, such as pruning, to enhance the benefits they provide our community and to reduce conflicts with community infrastructure. Routine pruning is necessary to prolong the life of the tree and minimize hazards such as falling limbs.

Community-owned trees (or public trees) are often pruned or removed for safety and health reasons. Utilities prune trees for a different purpose — to ensure that trees do not interfere with service lines. This helps prevent service interruptions from downed trees and branches.

Local governments are responsible for ensuring that trees in public areas and along public right-of-ways do not pose a safety risk to the public. On private property, owners are responsible for ensuring safety.

Trees can pose a safety risk if:

- they have structural defects or damage that may lead to falling and harm people or property,
- they limit line of sight on streets or driveways, or
- they grow into utility lines, interrupting power, cable, or phone service.



Becky Kirkland

Pruning or removal of trees that pose a health risk to the urban forest can minimize disease or insect infestations, minimize storm damage, and limit the spread of invasive plants, diseases, and insects. Local governments and private citizens must work together to ensure the overall health of the urban forest.

Trees are also pruned to maintain aesthetic appearances. Aesthetic pruning focuses on enhancing the natural form and character of the tree. Pruning also stimulates flower production in trees when it is timed appropriately within the growing season. Private property owners typically prune for aesthetic reasons, but most local governments do little or no aesthetic pruning because of costs.

**Certified arborists** are professionals who are trained in tree maintenance and care. Contact a certified arborist to periodically assess the health and address the maintenance and care of your trees. To find a certified arborist in your area, contact your local Co-operative Extension agent or search the International Society of Arboriculture Web site at <http://www.isa-arbor.com/findArborist/findarborist.aspx>

### Are there restrictions to pruning or removing trees on my property?

Check with your urban forester, city arborist, or other community officials before proceeding with pruning or tree removal. Permission may be required for any of the following situations:

- Trees, including historic, champion, or specimen trees, that are regulated through local ordinances.
- Trees within riparian buffers or along streams, rivers, or other bodies of water.
- Trees protected by easements or covenants on private property.